

Reflections

The Need to Revive Islamic Philosophy

Mohammed A. Muqtedar Khan

Abstract: *This paper argues that the contemporary attempts at reviving Islamic civilization will remain incomplete until a simultaneous effort is made to revive Islamic philosophy. This paper identifies the characteristics of Islamic philosophy and underscores its significance to Islamic intellectual renaissance. Islamic philosophy has a unique dimension—it encompasses science and spirituality along with reason and logic. Arguing that perhaps the decline of philosophy was an important element in the decline of Islamic civilization, the paper contends that Muslim efforts at negotiating modernity or appropriating science will not be successful without the support of a rejuvenated Islamic philosophical tradition.*

Islam is experiencing a global resurgence in its political and cultural significance to Muslim societies. A large section of Muslims, broadly understood as Islamists, is striving to Islamize the Muslim world through its intellectual and activist leadership. The most valuable and interesting aspect of contemporary Islamic revival is its concomitant intellectual renaissance. Once again Muslims, striving for authenticity, are beginning to enrich the practice of Islam with the pursuit of higher learning and literary and scientific inquiry.

While most Islamists are concerned with the decolonization of the Muslim world from Western and secular domination, a small but significant element is occupied with the supreme Jihād—the struggle to decolonize the Muslim mind. It is this intellectual revival which

M. A. Muqtedar Khan is a Doctoral Fellow in International Relations at Georgetown University. E-mail: khanm@gusun.georgetown.edu. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Convention of Association of Muslim Social Scientists at Rochester, NY, November 27-29, 1997.

holds the greatest promise for the future of Islam. This revival is manifest in the emergence of a new political philosophy of Islam, anchored by concepts such as the Islamic state, Islamic democracy, *al-ḥakimiyyah* (Allah's sovereignty) and Islamic political economy.

The project, Islamization of Knowledge, is another interesting experiment initiated by Muslim intellectuals to eliminate the influences of domination and power on knowledge. Islamization of knowledge as envisaged by Ismā'īl R. al-Fārūqī is an effort to advance an Islamic social science that would free the pursuit of social understanding from the imperatives and preferences of Eurocentric thought. Indeed it boldly seeks to replace Eurocentric preferences with Islamic prerogatives. Needless to say, the assumption that Islamic prerogatives are universally relevant and beneficial is integral to the project of Islamization of knowledge.¹

Unfortunately the only area in which Muslims have not displayed the contemporary spirit of Islamic renaissance is that of philosophy. Islamic philosophy has been one of the high points of Islamic learning and it was a prominent element of Islamic discourses. Without a revival of Islamic philosophy, the contemporary Islamic revival will be incomplete. Indeed the sustenance of the spirit of renaissance will not be viable without a parallel resurgence of Islamic philosophy. Islamic philosophy is necessary in order to give rigour and depth to the intellectual dimension of the resurgence as well as to provide a rational influence on its discourse to protect it from being consumed by polemics or symbolism. While there are many Muslim social scientists, there are only a handful of Muslim philosophers.

Hassan Hanafī of Egypt, Abdul Karīm Soroush of Iran and Seyyed Hossein Nasr are some of the few known Muslim philosophers. Hanafī is more of a Marxist employing Islamic enunciation than a genuine Islamic philosopher. Soroush is still far from locating himself in the tradition of Islamic philosophy. That leaves us with the sole, but gigantic figure, of Hossein Nasr. Nasr is metaphysical and mystical, like Ibn al-ʿArabī, and scientific and philosophical like Ibn Sīnā. However his strong advocacy of traditional Islam and a total rejection of modernity confuses us about his "location" in the genealogy of Islamic philosophy. Is he a relic or is he a prototype? Does he represent the last hurrah of traditional Islamic philosophy or does he represent a new beginning? I hope that his work provides sufficient provocation to revive the sleeping philosophers in the Muslim world.

While arguing the merits of the enterprise of philosophy, Abū Yusuf Yaʿqūb al-Kindī (d. 866 CE), the first genuine Islamic philosopher, suggested that the study of philosophy was either necessary or unnecessary. If necessary we have to study it, if unnecessary then we have to justify this contention and demonstrate its validity. But in order to justify and validate, we need philosophy. Therefore, al-Kindī concluded, there is no escape from the study of philosophy.² Al-Kindī's wisdom was unfortunately lost on the detractors of philosophy, particularly on the traditional juristic scholars of Islam. Their fear of the "speculative" element of philosophy, which sometimes questioned the existence and need for "God," and at other times asserted the multiplicity of truths—revelationary and philosophic—made them reject the philosophical enterprise in totality.

The decline of Islamic philosophy is often attributed to the backlash of Islamic jurists and purists led by the huge persona of Imām Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī. His *Tahāfatul al-falāsafah* (The Incoherence of Philosophers) is supposed to have been such a devastating critique of philosophy that since then the entire Muslim world has never strayed onto the philosophic path again. This popular reading of al-Ghazālī's critique of the philosophers has done much damage to the development of Islamic thought. Al-Ghazālī divided the works of the philosophers into six discourses: logic and mathematics, ethics and politics, and physics and metaphysics. He accepted the philosophers' logic and mathematics, he advocated caution with regards to ethics and politics but strongly rejected their physics and metaphysics. Indeed he even recommended excommunication (*takfīr*) against philosophers who argued the eternity of the world, or suggested that God had only the knowledge of the universals and not that of the particulars, or if they rejected the belief that on the day of judgement the human body would be resurrected. Importantly, he did not reject the scientific elements of philosophy. He only denounced the speculative aspect of philosophy that chose to put limits on divinity.³

Unfortunately for Muslims, the rather loose interpretation of al-Ghazālī's critique of philosophy has proven debilitating to the civilizational development of Islam. In the Muslim world the philosopher and the scientist merged in the same person. Philosophy and science were inseparably linked. Al-Kindī, al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā and al-Bīrūnī were all simultaneously philosophers as well as scientists.

Ibn Rushd, the great Andalusian philosopher was a jurist, a judge, a physician, and a philosopher.⁴ Thus when we rejected philosophy we rejected science. There is no doubt in my mind that the decline of philosophy, science, rational discourse and free thinking in Muslim society is the singular cause for the decline of Islamic civilization.

Today we are trying to re-appropriate science. Can we do it without reviving our philosophical traditions? Can projects like the Islamization of knowledge really make any substantial contributions without the intellectual support of philosophical advances? I doubt it. Philosophy and its constituent elements—ontology, epistemology, ethics—are necessary for building Islamic social theories and methodological paradigms. We can afford to ignore metaphysics, even completely concede this realm to the traditional '*ulamā*' and the *mutakallimīn*. But the other branches of philosophy need to be revived.

In order to understand this need for Islamic philosophy for the resurgence of Islam, we need to revisit the functions of philosophy. Philosophy is an effort to relate the abstract with the concrete, the universal with the particular, and the divine with the mundane. It is an effort to locate the specific being in the context of universal existence, and make the universal cognizant to the finite being. It is an effort to push back from the immediacy of existence in order to comprehend the totality of existence. It is an indulgence of an existential need to give meaning to life and make life meaningful. Philosophy is also reflection over the aesthetics of living and the aesthetics of being. Aesthetics of being is the nature of the perfect being and the aesthetics of living is about perfecting the individual being. The aesthetics of living at the collective level concerns with the conception of the virtuous city, the perfect society.

Today, Muslims need to understand the dynamics of social and political changes that are shaping their present and their future at the collective and individual level. They must be able to locate their collective and individual "selves" even as the very basis of contemporary society moves gradually from modernity into postmodernity. We need to understand the symmetry and the asymmetry between Islam and modernity. We need to grasp the crisis of modernity and the gradual shifting in the epistemological basis of "truth," from unity, cohesion and continuity to plurality, fragmentation and discontinuity. Today all boundaries are under siege

from within as well as from without. What does this new cognitive geography mean for traditional, enigmatic tensions between text and time, reason and revelation.

We haven't yet fully come to terms with the challenge of modernity and democracy, and yet on the horizon there is postmodernity and pluralism. How long will we keep chasing time and history? How long will we have to "adjust"? Can we ever be the masters of time and history, can we once again become the shapers rather than the reshaped? How long will matter (social conditions) govern our minds? How can we impose our minds on matter? Our world is deconstructed. We are more comfortable and even more free to be Muslims in "other domains" while we are persecuted and are prisoners in "our own domains." How and when will we liberate ourselves from ourselves and from others? Indeed never before have we needed philosophical reflection as much as we do today.

The need for Islamic philosophy, if acknowledged, immediately poses the question: What is Islamic philosophy? Is there such an idea as a transcendental Islamic essence that could colour philosophical cognition? Does indulgence in Islamic philosophy merely entail instrumentalizing philosophy by putting it under Islamic ethical and metaphysical constraints? For the Islamic modernists, who by virtue of their position are committed to the idea of "objectivity in science" and the Cartesian divide between object and subject, philosophy is *a priori* and value-free. Thus Islamizing philosophy would merely entail encouraging more Muslims to philosophize while simultaneously adhering to ethics, that is subordinating philosophy to the imperatives of an Islamic vision of society. But can an Islamic vision be *a priori*? There would then be no need for *ijtihād*. The Medinan model can be frozen as "eternal and infallible" and Islamic thought can be reduced or confined to *qiyās*, or analogical reasoning. This would be very close to the project of Ibn Taymiyyah, who even rejected *qiyās*.

But there are obviously some problems with this approach. This approach has been the *modus operandi* of mainstream 'ulamā' since Ibn Taymiyyah and has been reinvigorated with the rise of Wahābism in Saudi Arabia. May be the project is still in progress but the results so far are far from encouraging. Contemporary Saudi Arabia, in spite of its enormous natural wealth, cannot match the power, glory, and intellectual vitality and cultural richness of the Muslim world from the eighth to the thirteenth century. Besides, this approach will always be chasing time through analogical reasoning. This construction of

Islamic intellectual methodology does not recognize the growing "complexity" of social existence. We have to recognize that the Medinan model cannot be replicated in form but only in essence. The idealized Medina will remain the virtuous city to be emulated, even as we struggle with building Islamic states and Islamic leagues.

Accepting the Cartesian divide suggests that philosophy, like science, is a value-neutral enterprise and so we may incorporate Western philosophy on a need-to-know basis, as we begin to absorb Western science. This solution would be acceptable to Islamic modernists as well as the traditionalists who accept the dichotomization of knowledge into divine and secular. For the former, *ijtihad* is a means to catch up with the West, and for the latter, the advance in sciences does not threaten their sovereignty over Islamic interpretation of the realm of *'ibadah*. It is my contention that this approach will compound Muslim problems. We will end up with the chaotic, decadent and immoral dimensions of Western society if we were to assume that their methods were value-free. Moreover, I refuse to concede the scientific enterprise and systematic philosophy exclusively to the West. Both science and philosophy, as practiced in the contemporary West, are, in the final analysis, extensions of the works of Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Rushd. This reading of the history is not even challenged by the West anymore. Indeed they recognize the enormous significance of Islamic civilization to the contemporary West.

But the Western scholars have moved a long way off from the philosophical and scientific traditions they inherited from Muslims. They have reformed and revived their Christian traditions, and have sought with great vigor to compartmentalize knowledge. The very purpose of acquiring knowledge has been transformed. The West acquires knowledge to realize the sovereignty of the autonomous rational individual while Muslims sought knowledge to understand the nature of God, the nature of self, the nature of nature, and to realize the divinely ordained relationships between God and the self. The contemporary West while leaning on Islamic philosophical and scientific traditions has renounced the ethical and moral foundations of Islam. Therefore a mere appropriation may not serve the interests of Islam. Muslims could become like the West but the cost would be too high.

Does that mean we have to reinvent the wheel? In a way, yes. We

have to return to Islamic epistemological foundations and then try to balance the contingencies of the present even as we elongate the past to give continuity to the present.

Clearly the first step is to realize that we need to move from seeking structural reproduction of the past to reviving the spirit and the essence of the past. For example, rather than being obsessed with producing Islamic states and Islamic governments we must strive for Islamic societies and Islamic governance. It is not important how we elect our political leaders and whether we call them "President" or "*Khalifah*." What is important is that we realize Islamic governance. That means we produce righteous societies based on justice and goodness. It is not the form but the content that is important. So what can this elusive idea called Islamic philosophy do to empower us to revitalize and recreate our Islamic essence?

Hossein Nasr has argued that contemporary Western science has an embedded world view that is unIslamic in character. He contends that Islamic world view, premised on the unity of being and the holistic character of knowledge, is distinct.

... [A]lthough they influenced Western Sciences a great deal, the Islamic sciences are an independent way of studying the nature of phenomena, causality, the relationship between various forms of objects from minerals to plants to animals, the meaning of change and development in the world of nature and the final end and goal of nature. The point of view of Islamic sciences, which is independent of and distinct from the philosophical framework of Western sciences, must always be kept in mind in order to appreciate fully the significance of Islamic sciences for Islam as a religion and for Islamic civilization.⁵

To a great extent I agree with this position. However, Nasr's efforts to elucidate the framework of Islamic philosophy have been criticized and have yet to gain wide acceptance in the Muslim world. That does not in any way detract from the merit of his work. His work has made Islamic philosophy available to many in the Muslim as well as the non-Muslim world but has not inspired a philosophical renaissance. That, I contend, is necessary to give meaning and substance to the religious and political resurgence we are experiencing.

In a recent lecture at Georgetown, Soruosh made an interesting

analysis of modernity. He contended that Muslims needed to come to terms with modernity. He divided modernity into two elements; the fruits of modernity and the roots of modernity. Muslims, he pointed out, were major consumers of the fruits of modernity. In this realm the *Mullah* was very important for he determined which fruits of modernity were *ḥalāl* and which were *harām*. But when it came to the roots of modernity, the *Mullah* was at sea for he had no idea about its intellectual foundations. In order to come to terms with the roots of modernity we need the philosopher. Even to understand what to take and what not to take from modernity, we need philosophy.

So we need Islamic philosophy and we have an intuitive sense that it is distinct from Western philosophy. What is the difference? I think Western philosophy is based on the *a priori* privileging of the "self." Sometimes this self is the individual, sometimes the universal society, sometimes the nation-state and increasingly the West itself. The most profound character of Western philosophy is not its passion for reason, but its egotistical narratives that are obsessed with the sovereignty of the individual.

I believe that the most important element of Islamic philosophy is its focus on unity—oneness. It is a submissive philosophy that is essentially humble. While the sovereign reason may be the *a priori* in Western philosophy, the first covenant is the *a priori* in Islamic philosophy. The meaning of this first covenant is absolutely fundamental and infinitely profound. Indeed it is sufficient to form the base of the entire edifice of Islamic philosophy. Taking that first covenant as the underlying principle of life, we can let reason rule.

The first covenant postulates that all souls have affirmed the unity of God and affirmed their submission to Him prior to birth. It is enshrined in the Qur'ān (7: 172):

And (remember) when your Lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their loins, their seed, and made them testify of themselves, (saying): "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes surely. We testify." (That was) lest you should say on the day of resurrection: Lo! Of this we were unaware.

The beauty of this principle is that it allows us to always start afresh with the Qur'ān. We do not have to necessarily traverse back in time to recover lost jewels or bridge discontinuities. As long as we remember the first covenant, the Qur'ān will travel with us in time as

an always present, always accessible reservoir of meaning and the guardian of truth. That covenant links us with the divine through the Qur'ān providing the foundations necessary for a meaningful philosophy.

Notes

1. See *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Work Plan* (Herndon, VA: IIIT, 1989).
2. See Majid Fakhry, *A Short Introduction to Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism* (Oxford: One World Publications, 1997).
3. See Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). Also see Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Medieval Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
4. The year 1998 is the 800th anniversary of the death of Ibn Rushd (1128-1198).
5. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1994), 86.